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April 23, 2013

Chairman Greg Walden  
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology  
Committee on Energy and Commerce

Ranking Member Anna Eshoo  
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology  
Committee on Energy and Commerce

**RE: The Importance of Lifeline Phones to Individuals with Disabilities**

Dear Chairman Walden, Ranking Member Eshoo, Members of the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology:

The Center for Accessible Technology (CforAT), the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC), and the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) jointly send this letter to stress the importance of the Lifeline program to low-income people with disabilities.

CforAT is the nation's oldest center on assistive technology for use by people with disabilities. We work directly with people with disabilities to provide access to computers and the network, work as an intervenor on telecommunications issues at the California Public Utilities Commission on behalf of the disability community, and provide online services to enable people outside our local community to have access to technology information relevant to people with disabilities. We are particularly focused on how technology is used to access the network and the Internet.

HKNC serves people who are deaf and blind, and its mission is to enable each person who is deaf-blind to live and work in their community of choice. Many individuals who are deaf-blind are unemployed and underserved. They are also just now signing up with the National Deaf Blind Equipment Program and some can benefit from the Lifeline program for support with the cost of telecommunications.

NDRN is the national membership association for the Protection and Advocacy (P&A) and Client Assistance Program (CAP) agencies, the nationwide network of congressionally-mandated agencies that advocate on behalf of persons with disabilities in every state and territory. NDRN, the P&As, and CAPs promote a society where people

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with disabilities enjoy equality of opportunity and are able to participate fully in community life by exercising informed choice and self-determination. Since the use of technology and telecommunications is an important way people with disabilities achieve full community integration, NDRN, the P&As and CAPs are continually working to ensure that people with disabilities have access to these important technologies and devices.

CforAT, HKNC and NDRN are writing to you today in support of the Lifeline program. The Lifeline program provides affordable essential phone service to households with very low income, including many households containing a person with a disability. Phone connectivity is essential for reaching emergency services in a timely manner, and for maintaining connectivity to friends, family, employers, providers of social services, medical professionals, teachers, and for engaging in day to day activities such as refilling a prescription or finding out how much value remains on a prepaid card. We note that the standard wireless Lifeline product provides 250 minutes a month, which is a little over 4 hours a month. We consider this to be a very modest amount of minutes.

The Lifeline program is particularly important for individuals with disabilities. People with disabilities are the community with the highest levels of unemployment and under-employment. The disability community is also a community that is highly dependent on the network: people with disabilities use the network for health care issues, to decrease social isolation, and as a way of handling emergency issues. Without this connectivity, many people with disabilities may be unable to live independently, and may be forced into restrictive institutional care. For many people with disabilities, the network is not just a convenience – it is a critical life need, a true “lifeline” in every meaning of the word.

The Lifeline program was recently reformed to prevent fraud, waste and abuse. The reforms affect both the consumer and the carriers. Lifeline applicants must now provide documentation to certify eligibility for the program before being able to receive Lifeline (proof of income or participation in a qualifying program such as SNAP). Lifeline consumers must also verify annually that they are still eligible for the program and if they fail to do so, they are disenrolled. Consumers must also certify, among other things, that their household has only one Lifeline account. Carriers, too, must now disclose if a phone service is part of the Lifeline program and that an eligible household is only allowed to have one Lifeline service. The Lifeline reforms also require an officer of the company to certify every month they seek reimbursement for providing discounted service that they are in compliance with the program rules and certify, under penalty of perjury, that the information on the claim forms is true, accurate and complete. These reforms went into place last year and should be given a chance to roll-out before disrupting this vital public safety program.

The Lifeline Program is one that is important to providing equal access to people with disabilities, and we urge you to support this valuable program. Thank you for your careful review of this input.

Sincerely,

/S/

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Center for Accessible Technology

/S/

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/S/

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